

It Doesn't Take A Hero But It Did Take The Marines

Press Release

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PETERSON AFB, Colo. — Following the war against Iraq in 1991, a former Desert Storm Army commander wrote an autobiography entitled: "It Doesn't Take A Hero." On April 12, 2003, it did not take a hero but it did take 35 Marines to rescue the seven American soldiers who were being held prisoners in Iraq.

Almost a year after the rescue, Maj. Gordon D. Miller was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal (with Combat Distinguishing Device) in part, for leading his company into Samarra, Iraq, to free the soldiers captured in "Operation Iraqi Freedom."

Now assigned to U.S. Northern Command at Peterson AFB, Major Miller is a planner with the Bi-National Planning Group writing land and civil support contingency plans to respond to threats, attacks or other situations in the United States or Canada.

Since his arrival at Peterson AFB last summer, Major Miller has guarded against recognition for his part in the rescue. Primarily because "we did it, and that was it," he said. But during "Sea Services Call" March 15, Major Miller captured center stage as Col. Gene Pino, director of training and exercise and the senior Marine Corps officer at U.S. Northern Command, read the citation accompanying the medal.

In part, the citation states: "During the movement and actions within the objective area, his presence at the lead of each raid element provided for the safety of the prisoners of war."

People outside the Army may not recognize the names of those rescued but nearly every American will recall the circumstances leading to their capture since five of the seven were members of the 507th Maintenance Company from Fort Bliss, Texas. The soldiers were part of the convoy on its way to support allied forces when ambushed March 23, 2003, near Nasiriyah, Iraq.

Major Miller and his team did not know it when they burst into an Iraqi home, but they were about to rescue PFC Patrick Miller, of Park City, Kan.; Spec. Edgar Hernandez, of Mission, Texas; Spec. Joseph Hudson, of Alamogordo, N.M.; Spec. Shoshana Johnson, from Fort Bliss, Texas; and Sgt. James Riley, of Pennsauken, N.J.

Also in the house were Army Chief Warrant Officers David S. Williams and Ronald D. Young. The two had been flying an AH-64D Apache Longbow mission when shot down March 23 near Karbala, Iraq, which is 60 miles southwest of Baghdad. Oddly, the 1st Cavalry Division aircrew from Fort Hood, Texas, had been captured the same day as the ambushed soldiers.

For nearly two weeks after they had captured the Americans, the Iraqis had moved their prisoners every few nights. They moved them for the last time "to Samarra" just two days before the rescue, according to Major Miller. His award covered the period of January to April 2003, during which time he took part in 15 combat missions and three "sustained" enemy attacks.

"On several occasions, and at decisive times, he selflessly exposed himself to enemy fire to ensure critical tasks were accomplished," states his citation. "Furthermore, in the vicinity of Samarra, Iraq, with little combat information or guidance, he personally led a successful mission to rescue seven American Prisoners of War."

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During the recent Sea Services Call, "Silence fell across the room when the rescue of the seven POWs was mentioned," said Heather Miller, the major's wife. "Then a huge burst of applause and 'ooh rahs' rang out across the room," she said. "I was so overcome with emotion and pride, I could barely make it up to the front of the room for a picture."

About 150 sailors, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and members of the Canadian Navy attended the ceremony. "About 98 percent of those who were there had no clue Gordon had rescued the POWs," Mrs. Miller continued. "He is so quiet about the rescue." She said when asked why, her husband's usual response is "all that matters is that the POWs are home."

"But that is just like Gordon," continued Mrs. Miller, "and one of the many reasons I am so proud and extremely honored to call him my husband."

At the time of the rescue, Miller was a captain and commander of "D" Company, 3rd Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Marine Division. His original mission was leading and providing forward reconnaissance and security for a military task force heading north to secure Saddam Hussein's ancestral hometown of Tikrit.

"We were in Samarra in case there were any enemy forces there that tried to attack the task force," said Major Miller. He said his unit had been stopping traffic and searching vehicles for weapons and ammunition when they learned that "friendly forces" were being held captive in the city by Iraqi guards who wanted to surrender the prisoners.

It was about 8:30 a.m. that Sunday when Major Miller's battalion commander turned to him and said, "Take a platoon and go get them (the POWs)." That was easier said than done, according to Major Miller.

Directions to the house were not clear. And the hastily sketched map supplied by the informant proved equally confusing. Major Miller and his men headed toward Samarra in six light armored vehicles (LAV-25s), but instead of turning left at the bridge, they turned right. They had been told to look for a tower. There are several towers in Samarra, Major Miller said. The one the informant meant was the famed "Tower of Babel," which was located on the other side of town.

About half way down the road, Major Miller said they realized the mistake. About the same time one of his men called in saying "he had spotted a guy with an RPG (rocket propelled grenade)," said the major. "All of us started thinking the same thing: 'what's going on?' And, 'we need to get out of this area.'"

The six armored vehicles were turned around and headed back to the spot where the group had veered off course. This time, they reached the correct area but stopped one street away from where they needed to be.

Major Miller told his scouts to dismount and follow him. He told the other half of the group to hold their positions.

"As we went up the street, we counted the doors," Major Miller said. At the seventh door, which should have been the right address, his interpreter said, "this isn't the house." They were looking for No. 13 but were standing in front of No. 31.

While the interpreter queried the people next door, Major Miller got word that "people were on the roof of another building gesturing for us to come over to the other street."

He said he grabbed his rifle and told the interpreter and another Marine to accompany

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him. As they approached the area, Major Miller said they still doubted they were in the right location. However, about that time, "a scarecrow of a person in striped pajamas was standing at the gate to the (correct) house motioning for me to come over there," said Major Miller. The group advanced and in the process "scared the guy" so badly, he tried to close the gate in their faces. The man in pajamas turned out to be Warrant Officer Williams, who had apparently heard the LAVs coming.

"The LAV makes a distinct sound " different than any other vehicle out there " because of the engine, the muffler, and the brake," explained Major Miller. "Apparently Dave Williams heard us coming and was able to get out of the house."

When they reached the right house, Miller said they knocked on the door three times " as instructed by the informant " but nothing happened. One of the Marines tried to kick down the door. By then, another Marine found an open door and the group rushed into the building. Once inside, Major Miller and his men made everyone lie face down on the floor.

Although armed, the Iraqis made no attempt to draw their weapons, said Major Miller. And throughout those first few minutes, the soldiers kept shouting at their rescuers not to harm the guards. "Apparently, the guards had treated them humanely," said Major Miller.

Major Miller and his men hustled the soldiers out of the building and into the back of one of the LAVs. He said they then offered the guards a choice: "come with us as prisoners or stay behind and escape." The guards chose to stay behind, Major Miller said.

The rescue operation that Sunday morning in April had taken less than half an hour from start to finish. But within that time, Major Miller said there were several harrowing moments. The first occurred when the group spotted the Iraqi with the RPG. The second occurred while searching for the right house.

"As we were moving around the houses, Iraqi civilians started massing " some of them were atop their houses," said Major Miller. "All of us started reliving scenes from (the movie) "Black Hawk Down," where Somalis started coming out of everywhere " and each of them had weapons " and a small team (of U.S. soldiers) got mowed down. But as soon as we saw Dave Williams, those scenes left our minds," said Major Miller. "We knew we'd achieved our objective and could fight our way out if we had too."

Major Miller said they wanted very much to avoid a firefight before rescuing the prisoners. A fight, he said, might have forced them to leave behind the POWs. Fortunately, that did not happen.

Once the soldiers were safely housed at the Marine base of operation, they were given food, water and medical attention. "Some of the guys gave up portions of their uniforms and other clothing," said Major Miller. He said the soldiers were dressed only in the nightclothes provided by the Iraqis.

Most of soldiers were in good shape though Specialist Johnson had sustained gunshots in both ankles and Specialist Hernandez had been shot in the arm.

Major Miller said his unit called in two CH-46 helicopters to "pick up casualties." It was the only way to radio for help from their location, he explained. "Obviously the pilots were elated to find that their passengers were alive," he said. The former prisoners were flown to a secure airfield, code named "Three Rivers Stadium," where

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they boarded a C-130 for Kuwait City.

For the soldiers, an ordeal that had started three weeks earlier had ended. They were on their way home. But for Major Miller and his company, it was back to the mission. "We still had to get to Tikrit," said Major Miller. His unit would remain in Iraq until June 8, 2003, when they finally returned to home base at Twenty-Nine Palms, Calif.